

# The body of Christ

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With his death in A.D. c.30, a radical young mystic from Judaea altered the course of western (art) history for ever. But to what extent were Judaeo-Christian concepts of God dependent on earlier Greek and Roman ideas? By re-opening that question, this article analyses not just the triumph of Christianity, but also the triumph of pagan idolatry...

What does 'god' look like? One high-tech way of answering that question is to type 'god' into a Google image-search. Some of the answers are familiar: we see conventional pictures of the Judaeo-Christian 'God', for example, often portrayed as bearded hippie in the sky. Other results are somewhat stranger. As well as countless Christs, the same Google-search brought up cosmic diagrams, black holes, the odd Buddha, George Bush, and a bronze statue of Mickey Mouse. If you don't believe me, try the experiment for yourself!

## 'A world full of gods'

I find these 'Google gods' an epiphanic way for thinking about the divine in the Graeco-Roman world. As a classical archaeologist, I'm often struck by the sheer *number* of gods worshipped by our Greek and Roman forebears. It's not just a question of mass, nor indeed variety. What fascinates me, rather, is the easy assumption that the gods could be visualized in the first place.

For Greek and Roman viewers, the divine world was an *embodied* world: gods could be figured in (and experienced through) the human body. Two hypotheses are at work here. First comes the logic of 'anthropomorphism' (from the Greek *anthrôpos* meaning 'human', and *morphê* meaning 'form'): cultic practice was predicated on the idea that divine bodies are on some level the same as human bodies. Second, there's an assumption about images and their power: just as the gods might be mediated through human form, so too might that form itself be mediated through man-made, material means. Images could not simply re-present the divine, in other words; they could also render deities literally present before a viewer's eyes.

By the end of the first century A.D., this rhetoric was itself embodied in a provoca-

tive speech by Dio Chrysostom (his twelfth *Oration*, delivered at Olympia in A.D. 97). Why is it, Dio asks, that the Greeks sculpt their gods in human form, whereas other peoples do not? Dio comes up with an answer: our Greek system is best, he concludes, because 'we seek to portray in a visible and perceptible way what cannot be depicted or seen'. Paintings, statues, household figurines: images of the gods are required for the same reason that we need anthropomorphic forms in which to imagine them.

## God Incarnate

Less than a century before Dio was writing, in a provincial backwater of the Roman Empire, there was born a man (or a God?) who would change these ideas for ever. Hailing from Nazareth, 'Jesus' was raised a Jew. As such, Jesus must have been well versed in Old Testament strictures about image-making. 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image', as the Second Commandment has it: because Yahweh was the one true God, and because He was not embodied, any image that suggested otherwise could be branded 'idolatrous'. For Jews in the ancient and modern world alike, it is Scripture that provides the truest image of God: Yahweh calls upon Israel to 'hearken', not to 'see'.

But what about Judaeo-Christianity? As God Incarnate, Jesus posed a problem to traditional Judaic ideas about figuring the divine. In some sense Jesus was the ultimate Graeco-Roman anthropomorphic deity: he/He was God and Man rolled into one – he died on the cross, and he rose again on the third day. Drawing from both Judaism and Graeco-Roman traditions, the new cult of Christianity inherited a perplexingly contradictory set of ideas about Christ's (im)mortality and the permissibility of the image. If Christ was truly God, how to explain his (His?) death and resurrection? Likewise, if Christ was

truly mortal, how could He (he?) be truly God?

## (Dis)embodying the divine

Such debates about Christ's 'christology' were both driven by and reflected in the earliest attempts to visualize him/Him. To non-Christian eyes, it must have been easy to attribute this strange Oriental deity with an eastern-looking body. One (third-century?) graffito from Rome suggests precisely this, stretching Jesus out on the cross, giving the figure an ass's head, and adding a jibe about a convert named Alexamenos (right): 'Alexamenos worships God', reads the graffito – or perhaps better, 'this is the "god" that Alexamenos worships!'

Christ's body must also have perplexed early converts like 'Alexamenos' himself. After all, Jesus' disciples and apostles were good at *verbally* figuring out who Jesus was/is. But they provided only minimal clues about what the 'Word made flesh' (John 1:14) and 'Image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15) actually looked like. So how, then, to imag(in)e Jesus?

Image-makers stumbled upon a variety of (non-)solutions in the second and third centuries. One response was to stick with symbols. Symbols included the *chi-rho* 'christogram' (abbreviating the first two letters of Christ's name), the schematic outline of a fish or *ichthus* (an acronym for a theological statement about Jesus' identity as 'Jesus Christ the Son of God and Saviour'), and the alpha-omega (Christ as the beginning and the end – fashioned from the opening and closing letters of the Greek alphabet). Each of these visualizations had material form; and yet each of them also managed to transcend that material 'bodiliness' (below). By laying claim to an allegorical significance, these symbols figured the paradoxes of Christ's own material-cum-immaterial divinity: we see, and yet we don't see.

This intellectual and theological backdrop helps to explain one of the most popular images for figuring Christ in the third century: the 'Good Shepherd'. It's a recognisable schema: a male youth carries a lamb around his shoulders; the figure is dressed, and is often surrounded by his flock (top of p. 23). The reference takes us

to Christ's alleged self-comparison with the 'Good Shepherd' 'who lays down his life for his sheep' (e.g. John 10:11). And yet there is also an ambiguity in this body: for are we looking at Jesus himself, or at an allegory-cum-analogy ('Christ is like a good shepherd'). Indeed, was Jesus (like) the shepherd, or was he/He (like) the lamb – the sacrificial victim slain for our sins (cf. John 1:29, 36)?

### A question of dogma

The fourth century A.D. brought debates about Jesus' body to a head. Whether out of personal spiritual conversion or (more likely) for reasons of imperial administration, the Emperor Constantine decided to embrace the eastern cult: after years of oppression, Christianity found itself thrust into the limelight; it was chosen as the religion for uniting Constantine's empire. But Christianity had now to return the favour. Constantine had chosen Christianity. The very least he expected was a single theological line.

The first Council of Nicaea of A.D. 325 attempted to deliver just that. Striving to reconcile rival positions, the assembled bishops agreed upon a single set of dogmas. Here was the answer everyone had been waiting for (drum-roll!): Christ was both *fully* God and *fully* Man.

### Grave visions

So how *visually* to portray that established truth? One revealing case study is a little-known sarcophagus from Rome, made soon after the dogmas of the Nicaean Council (and consequently dubbed the 'Dogmatic sarcophagus' (p.23 bottom)). A central medallion depicting the deceased lies amidst a variety of scenes from the Old and New Testaments. Proceeding from left to right, the upper frieze shows the story of Adam and Eve on one side, and three of Jesus' miracles on the other (Jesus turning water into wine, multiplying the loaves, and bringing back Lazarus from the dead – an appropriate theme for a sarcophagus). In the lower section, we see the three Magi visiting the Holy Family, Jesus healing a blind boy, Daniel in the lion's den, and three scenes from the life of Saint Peter.

What is most remarkable about this sarcophagus, though, is its brave attempt to embody the 'Holy Trinity' at the upper left-hand corner. We see 'God the Father', 'God the Son', and 'God the Holy Spirit' forming a collective triumvirate of bearded and clothed men. God the Father sits in the middle, like a seated Zeus or Jupiter, rendered in a larger size (what would happen if the figure stood up? one may well ask). Nicaean dogma, which is expressed in the Nicene creed, is here visualized for us all to see: the three forms

of 'God' are (essentially) all the same, and all share something in common with humanity.

But here comes the rub. If God is one with Christ, and Christ is one with Man, how to convey the simultaneous *divinity* of the divine? By playing with the different scales of his figures, our artist follows a favourite Greek and Roman artistic solution: just as the seated God the Father is shown as the largest of the tripartite Trinity, the bodies of Adam and Eve directly to their right are rendered in a considerably *smaller* scale: Adam lies prostrate at God's feet, while the minuscule Eve has been created from his rib.

The theology of all this must have bewildered many. Notice, for example, how Adam and Eve are shown in full size in the following scene, commensurable with the Trinity once more (and is this 'God the Son' or 'God the Father' standing between them?). As if the theological intricacies of representing the Trinity were not tricky enough, the 'Dogmatic sarcophagus' also reckons with the comparative sacredness of other sorts of (semi-?)divine bodies: its lower frieze depicts the prophet Daniel, Saint Peter, and the Virgin Mary (among others). Not only must the monarchic principle of a monotheistic God be squared with the theology of the Trinity – a three-formed God at once having a body and not having a body – the mother/Mother of God (that is, the mother/Mother of the son/Son of God?) had somehow to be accommodated within this visual scheme.

Resourceful to the last, our sculptor struck upon a series of cunning compositional solutions. Note, for instance, how the arrangement of the Holy Trinity at the upper left is repeated in the schema of the tripartite Holy Family directly below, with the seated Father now transformed into the Virgin Mary (what would now happen if *She* stood up?). No less ingenious is the right-hand side of the sarcophagus, where the exploits of Peter are made to chime with the miracles of Jesus. These sorts of spatial analogies solicit conceptual parallels within a multifarious theology of the body – God, Christ, Mary, the saints, the prophets. The images posit questions. But it is left to viewers to extricate an interpretative explanation.

### The triumph of Christianity?

Let me end this article by winding the clock forward: the year is c.1585, and we are looking up at the ceiling of one of the Raphael rooms in the Vatican. The artist, Tommaso Laureti, is said to have labelled this fresco *The Triumph of Christianity*: an

idolatrous ancient statue of Mercury lies on the floor, smashed to smithereens by the true image of God – an image of Christ on the cross.

But just whose 'triumph' is this? The story usually told of Christianity is of 'pagan' idolatry overturned. This article has painted a more complex picture: in some sense, its residual grip over Christian theology and art means that pagan idolatry ultimately triumphed over (and through) Christianity. Laureti's picture demonstrates as much. Compare the body of Christ with that of the statue obliterated, for example, and we see a clear resemblance between these two 'gods'. Sure, Christ's death amounts to a *repudiation* of the body. And yet, stripped and exposed, Christ is also attributed with a beautiful (and almost naked!) classical physique: this anthropomorphic god/God has been cast after an ancient (eroticized?) Apollonian mould.

Still more fascinating is the power attributed to this Christian icon. If Laureti bestows on Christ an ambiguous sort of body, he also endows his *representation* of that body with an ambiguous sort of iconic presence: are we looking at an image of Christ on the cross, or the real body of Christ *present* before us? Set up on its pedestal, Christ's effigy has the same totemic immediacy as the ancient statue it destroys: the crucifix out-idols even the pagan idolatry that it annihilates. The (painted image of the) image of the crucifix consequently hovers between different states of being or 'ontologies': it leaves us with conflicting ideas about what Christ – no less than his figured form – really is.

Whatever our response to an image like this, the painting testifies to an ultimate truth: if you want to understand Christianity – and indeed the entire tradition of western art – you have first to get to grips with the Graeco-Roman archaeology.

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